

# The Mystery at 23

By GEORGE STILLWELL

For a moment Jack was inclined to tell her that he had seen two policemen marching away with the head of the household at No. 23. Then, fearing lest in some way his mother would use this information to club his father with, he quickly decided that the less he said the better. Let his mother read it in the newspaper in the morning. That would be time enough.

After all, it was none of his business—or hers, either. His father's visits to No. 23 seemed to have passed off without any harm to him. That was all the interest they need have in the affair.

But Jack could not dismiss it quite so lightly as he desired. Something stuck unpleasantly in his mind. It was the last line of the article he had just read, referring to the two "confederates" of the robber gang, who were "known to be women."

His mother had picked up the paper from the table and was poring over it thoughtfully. She seemed to be trying to search out something she wanted to learn between the lines.

With a sly movement of his head, accompanied by a twist of the mouth, his father signaled to go outside.

Taking the hint, Jack sauntered to the front door, which he had left partly open when he came in. Absorbed in the paper, his mother did not notice his departure. He found the night air cool, so he stepped into the hall for his hat.

As he threw it on the back of his head he came into sharp collision in the dark with his father.

"All right, Jack! Don't make a noise."

The two stepped quietly out to the porch. Mr. Ladd peeped down the hall to make sure that his wife had not come out of the dining-room.

"Jack!" he whispered eagerly. "I—"

Whatever he was going to say had to be put off for that occasion. Jack ran swiftly down the steps, out of the gateway, and up the street.

He had seen three persons walking rapidly away. As they reached the corner he identified them, in the light of a street-lamp, as the wife of the stocky man at No. 23, with her son and—Therese!

## CHAPTER IX.

### CLEARING THE MYSTERY.

What ultimate intention Jack had in following these three persons from No. 23 he could not have told. Indeed, he had no definite purpose except to see where they went. Not that it was any business of his. If he had considered the matter calmly he would have been the first to admit that he had absolutely no excuse for intruding on them.

But he did not stop to consider. He merely followed.

It was nearly twelve o'clock. But

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Therese and her mother did not seem to care for that. Why should they? Could not either of them have laid out the most powerful footpad who might have attacked them?

For that matter, did not these two quietly behaved persons belong to the strong-arm fraternity themselves? That was the opinion of Jack's mother, and it was not to be denied that circumstances of late tended to uphold that view.

"What a fine, free stride that girl has!" thought Jack. "And that easy swing of her arms! If she plays golf I'll bet she has a three-hundred-yard drive. And her mother goes along as easily as she does. Well, that's to be expected. Of course she looked after her daughter when she was little and made her what she is."

He did not comment on the brother; Jack was not quite so much interested in him as in Therese. Besides, Jack had seen him hustling that heavy furniture when they were moving in, and had set him down for a trained athlete there and then. Good walking was to be expected of a well-built, active young fellow like that.

The journey was short. When they had gone some five or six blocks, turning several corners, the three residents of No. 23 stopped in front of a large, well-lighted house, approached by a flight of stone steps.

Even without the evidence of the lamps guarding the steps outside Jack would have known what the place was. It bore the unmistakable stamp of its character in a dozen different details.

"Geel! It's a police station!" he exclaimed. "Now what?"

The brother of Therese looked at the lighted windows. Then he went up the steps and entered, closing the door behind him. His mother and sister remained outside at the foot of the steps.

This was a queer proceeding, it seemed to Jack. Had the young man gone in to give himself up? Or had he ventured into this ominous place to visit his father in a cell? Would not the police gather him in as soon as they saw him? But then, why hadn't they done it before, when they arrested the father?

Jack considered all these questions in turn, but worked out a satisfactory answer for none of them. So he stood at a little distance in the deep shadow across the street and waited.

He was glad that Therese was not wanted by the authorities. Evidently she was not—nor her mother or brother either—or they would not be here, putting their heads in the lion's mouth.

For five minutes the young fellow from No. 23 remained in the police station. Then the door opened and he came out. With him were the two plain-clothes policemen who had visited his home and afterward had left the house, conducting the stocky man between them.

It looked as if the son were in custody now. He came down the steps between the two officers. Keeping him close to them, they took their places on either side of Therese and her mother. The whole proceeding was conducted with official gravity.

There were a few words spoken by the policemen in a low growl. Jack could not make out what they said, but assumed that they were giving orders. He was confirmed in this supposition when the brother marched off in front of the others, about three paces away, while the others formed two-and-two and followed.

The order was: First the brother, then a policeman with Therese, then the other policeman with the mother. The little procession kept soldierly step, and the clacking of their heels echoed in the silent street like those of a corporal's guard in the regular army.

Jack Ladd cautiously trailed them. Keeping on the other side whenever he could.

It was a pretty long trip this time—out of the street where the police station stood to a main thoroughfare; in and out of a labyrinth of cross streets; occasionally a short-cut through on alley or across a small park. But always the party progressed steadily and unhesitatingly. The police knew exactly where they were going.

Jack had long ceased to conjecture where the march would end. What would be the use of his worrying about it? He would learn their destination if he stuck to it—and he had made up his mind to do that to the last wisp of the hammer.

Suddenly, at a gruff word from one of the policemen, the brother dived down a narrow opening between two big, frowning houses, in a dark street. The four others marched after him.

Jack Ladd paused for a few moments. Then he plunged into the

little alley after them.

It was a mere slit in the towering brick wall of what might have been a storage warehouse or great factory. Everything was gloomy and mysterious. A door opened at the very end and a glare of light illuminated the passageway.

The two policemen with their three companions entered the lighted place, and the door, controlled by a spring, banged shut. All became dark as before.

"I begin to see," muttered Jack. "I'm going in."

He opened the door, which was not fastened, and found himself in a square lobby. An electric light with a strong reflector on the wall halfblinded him. At one side was a little hutch like a ticket-taker's booth. It was empty.

Another door faced him; he pushed it open. A peculiar odor, like that of a newly whitewashed barber-shop, gushed forth. This was not the first time he had enjoyed this sort of smell. It pervaded the Classic Club when Jack had accompanied his father there for rehearsal. He had been given to understand that it was the paint on the scenery contending with actors' "make-up."

Jack groped along a dark hallway for a few yards and came out on the stage of a theater.

The curtain was up; the footlights and border-lights were on. By this illumination Jack saw the white-draped orchestra seats and balconies in a great, black vault beyond. Men in overalls were stacking "flats" against the wall. The only other persons on the stage were the two plain-clothes policemen and—the stocky man from No. 23 Teak Street!

The stocky man was showing the officers a leather article which Jack recognized as a cestus. They evinced interest, but no hostility. In fact, the three seemed to be on the most friendly terms.

No one spoke to Jack as he walked forward. He learned afterward that the stage doorkeeper had slipped around the corner for some coffee without the knowledge of the people inside. They took it for granted that any one getting past the doorkeeper—the most vigilant of his species in Philadelphia—must have a right to be on the stage.

"Why, how do you do, Mr. Ladd?" It was the silvery voice of Therese Darnley. Jack turned. For the moment he thought he was mistaken. He saw a girl in what she told him was "practise costume."

It consisted of a blouse and knickerbockers of blue serge. He told himself when he was sure it was Therese that it became her exceedingly well. Looking at her white canvas slippers, he thought what dainty feet she had.

"I—I—am very glad to see you, Therese," he stammered.

She gave him one of those quizzical smiles which always made him feel rather cheap, even though he admired them.

"Are you? That's kind of you! But I didn't expect to see you in the Ixion Theater at this time of night, when, as Shakespeare says, it is 'at odds with morning.'"

"It is late for you as well as me, isn't it?" returned Jack, trying to recover himself.

"I am here for business. We are going to rehearse our act. You have heard of the 'D'Armee Family,' acrobatic clowns, haven't you?"

"Of course I have. I saw them with the Jungling Circus last summer."

"Yes. We have just come in after our summer's work. We open in this theater next week. That's why we've been rehearsing so hard. Working in a theater is different from performing in a tent, you know."

"But why at this time of night?" asked Jack, resolved to get at the bottom of the mystery while he was about it.

"Well, you see, there are two shows a day at the Ixion. You can't often get the stage for rehearsal in the forenoon because the stagehands are busy and they make so much noise. So we have had to come after the performance, between twelve and two in the morning. You may have noticed us all leaving the house late at night since we have been living in Teak Street."

"I have," replied Jack dryly. "But will you tell me why are those policemen here? I saw them come in with you a little while ago. They are talking to your father over there."

"Oh, yes. We are all going to do an act for the benefit of the Police Benefit Association next Tuesday afternoon. It won't be our regular acrobatic act, but a melodramatic sketch with a great fight as the wind-up."

"That thing in my father's hand is a cestus. He and one of those officers will do the fight; they have been rehearsing hard, both in the theater and at home."

"Oh!" ejaculated Jack, drawing a long breath. "Didn't they rehearse with my father at your house to-night?"

"Of course they did. And your father knocked Mr. McCarthy—that's the policeman—through the window. You know something about that, don't you?" she replied, laughing merrily.

"My father was on the police force in Philadelphia ten years ago, before he went into the circus business, and he knows all the policemen in the city now. He used to be an amateur actor when he was on the force. That's when he knew your father. They were quite chums in those

days, I believe."

Jack Ladd passed his hand across his forehead. The mists that had enveloped him with regard to the family at No. 23 Teak Street were evaporating fast.

"I wonder why dad would not tell any one why he went to your house?" he said, half to himself.

"I can tell you that too," she volunteered. "He and my father and Mr. McCarthy all wanted to rehearse the cestus fight. But the police association are keeping all about their entertainment a secret. So my father asked Mr. Ladd not to say a word about his coming in to rehearse until the final program is in shape—not even to Mrs. Ladd."

"I don't blame them for taking that precaution. If mother ever had known she would have told everybody before."

"What did you say?" she asked, for he had only mumbled this.

"Nothing. Only I am glad I know what it all means. Are the police going to play the same thing that they will put on at the Classic—'The Mercy of Nero'?"

"A condensed version of it. Your father is staging it for them. He has the permission of the Classic Club. The members of the club are all good friends of the police."

"I see. And the cestus fight will be the big feature?"

"Yes. But now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go to work. The rehearsal is going to begin. Will you stay and see us run through it?"

"Thank you, but I can't. I have to get home. I hope I shall see you tomorrow," said Jack blunderingly.

"Now, Therese! Come over here!" shouted the stocky man, and the rehearsal began.

Jack Ladd found his way to the street. He was glad everybody was in bed when he reached home.

In the morning Jack and his father went to the shipyard together. Mrs. Ladd had been silent—not to say grim—at the breakfast-table.

"Well, my boy, it's all right!" said Mr. Thomas Ladd as he and his son stood on the platform of the street-car.

"That so, dad? Did you fix it with mother?"

"Yes. I did what I should have done at first—made a clean breast of the whole affair. And now I'll tell you."

"You needn't, dad. I went to a rehearsal at the Ixion Theater last night and Therese Darnley told me all about it."

"She did?" cried Mr. Ladd in a pleased tone. "That is better still. Now I know it is all right with the Darnleys. But, oh Lord! What a time I've had!"

"Poor dad!" was Jack's sympathetic response.

The police did arrest the burglars who had robbed so many houses. But they were not the family at No. 23 Teak Street. Neither were there any women in the gang; the police had allowed that impression to get abroad to draw attention from their hunt for the real crooks, whom they had been trying to catch from the first.

The prisoners were two gigantic men, of extraordinary strength, whose "mugs" are in every rogues' gallery in the country. "Big Jake" and "Cuckoo" are the names by which they are known to the police and the underworld. Both of these gentlemen are in the Eastern Penitentiary of Pennsylvania to serve time long enough to keep them out of mischief until the twentieth century is well advanced.

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"I hear that you and Mr. Lovem are going to fight a duel."

"We are."

"And it's about me?"

"It is."

"It must not be."

"One or the other must die. We can't both marry you."

"No, but you can compromise."

"How?"

"Play poker till one or the other gets all the money, and then I will marry

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